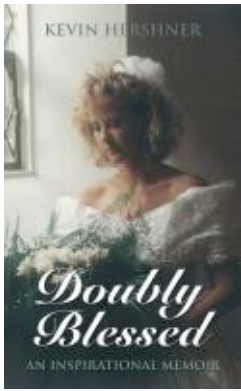


A photograph of a woman in a white wedding dress, looking down at a large bouquet of white roses and greenery. The lighting is soft and dramatic, highlighting her hair and the texture of the dress. The background is dark, with a window visible on the left side.

KEVIN HERSHNER

*Doubly
Blessed*

AN INSPIRATIONAL MEMOIR



***Doubly Blessed** is an inspirational, true story about the author's life as a younger man and how he dealt with his first wife's death from cancer at the young age of 26. It conveys the message that no matter how bleak the situation, if you look hard enough and long enough, you can usually find a light at the end of the tunnel. It's a story of hope.*

Doubly Blessed

An Inspirational Memoir

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Doubly Blessed

An Inspirational Memoir

Kevin Hershner

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First Edition

1

We Met

I was raised in a very loving home in Lexington, Ohio, a small town on the south side of Mansfield in the north central part of the state. While growing up, I was what you might refer to as a typical Midwestern boy. More often than not, on summer days, I'd head outside right after breakfast and not return until my Mom called us in for dinner. After dinner, or supper as we called it in our house, I'd head outside again and not come back until I had finished our nightly neighborhood game of flashlight tag. Most of my time back then was spent playing baseball at the Lexington little league park on Plymouth Street, or shooting hoops in our driveway. My brother, the neighbor boys, and I would often spend entire weekends in the woods, zipping around the trails on our dirt bikes, roasting hotdogs over a fire pit, and sleeping in our tents.

For me, back then, family was everything. The importance of family was instilled in me at a very young age, and it's a value that I've carried closely with me into adulthood. The two people responsible for teaching me that cherished value are my parents, Lowell and Anne Hershner, who recently celebrated their 51st wedding anniversary. I happen to be the middle of their three children. My brother, Tony, is two years older than me, and my sister, Tiffany, is five years younger.

Ours was a close family all those years ago while growing up on the corner of Cook and Lexington Springmill Roads. Back then, I hung out with Tony a lot,

playing sports in the backyard or building forts in the woods. As for Tiffany, I made sure to dutifully fulfill my big brotherly obligation of teasing her incessantly. I may have taken that obligation a bit too far at times, but I only teased my little sister because I loved her. In spite of that teasing, and in spite the distances that separate us as adults, our family remains very close today, and I count my blessings for that.

So, suffice it to say, I was a happy kid. For the purposes of this story, however, I'm going to fast forward through those childhood years, and I'll begin in early September of 1985, on the campus of Ohio University, in Athens, Ohio.

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Athens is a small, quaint, college town, nestled in the Hocking Hills in the rural, southeastern part of the state. As you come around the bend on Route 33, heading east towards Route 682, off to the right and across the Hocking River sit large, solid, red brick buildings scattered over the rolling landscape. Some of the buildings are dormitories. Some of them house classrooms and auditoriums, and others are university office buildings. If you take a right onto Richland Avenue and follow it over the bridge, past the football stadium on your right, the huge, domed Convocation Center on your left, and continue up the hill, it'll lead you uptown to the one way brick roads where all the shops, and bookstores, and college bars are intertwined up and down Court Street.

Athens is always a beautiful place, but it's at its most splendor in the fall when all the leaves on the trees turn to red, and yellow, and orange. It's absolutely stunning, and, as luck would have it, that breathtaking autumn sight was my first impression of my new home as I came around the bend on Route 33 that warm September day.

I arrived on campus that fall as a bright eyed, 18 year old kid, very excited and a little nervous to begin that next chapter of my life. As that bright eyed kid, I didn't realize at the time just how special and memorable those next four years of my life would turn out to be. I also didn't realize those next four years at OU would lead me on a journey to my soul mate, Debbie Lane.

.....

I lived in James Hall, on West Green, when I first saw her. James Hall was one of the large, red brick buildings that dominated the architecture on campus, and it was my home sweet home that first year as an 18 year old student in Athens. It was an all freshman male dormitory that often smelled as you'd expect an all freshman male dormitory to smell. Venturing into the restrooms on Sunday mornings was, more often than not, a very unpleasant experience. Eventually, though, I came to accept the fact that I had to take the bad with the good when it came to my new home, and I definitely had more than my share of good times while living in James Hall that first year at OU.

Wearing my dark green Ohio University sweatshirt with the large white paw print on the back, and with my book bag slung over my right shoulder, I stepped through

the front door of James Hall and into the crisp October morning air. I turned right, and began the ten minute walk to my math class in Morton Hall. As I stood at the curb, waiting to cross Richland Avenue, I saw Debbie, in her light blue Alpha Xi Delta sweatshirt, and two of her friends walking towards me. A young college guy tends to notice an attractive female when he sees one. She had blond hair, blue eyes, and a smile that lit up the morning. I couldn't help but take notice of her; she was absolutely beautiful, but I actually didn't give her another thought. She was just one of the hundreds of pretty girls that I'd see on campus every day.

My college life continued on through my freshman, sophomore, and junior years, and somewhere during that time, unbeknownst to me, Debbie had to take a leave from school to begin treatments for Hodgkin's disease. I was unaware of this because we had never exchanged anything more than a quick "hello" while passing each other walking to and from class. To be honest, I didn't even notice she was gone. She had been diagnosed with cancer and had to go home to Marietta, Ohio to fight for her life...and she won. She had her spleen removed and went thru a battery of terribly difficult chemotherapy treatments that, luckily, were successful at putting her into remission. After she won her battle, Debbie came back to school, and our friendship eventually began in the spring of '89, the last quarter of my senior year.

We had two classes together that spring quarter, which gave me the opportunity to nervously strike up a conversation with Debbie from time to time. This wasn't easy for me to do as, at that time, I was a little on the shy

side. OK, I was a lot on the shy side, but once I got to know Debbie, I couldn't believe how down to earth she was. She was just a regular girl. She was the kind of girl who was amazingly beautiful but didn't know it. Or, perhaps she did know it, but she didn't take it for granted after having gone through those debilitating cancer treatments just a few years earlier. Either way, I was surprised at how personable she was and how easy to talk to she turned out to be. I wouldn't say we were great friends at the time, but it was definitely heading in that direction.

At house parties on the weekends, Debbie and I seemed to always eventually gravitate to each other. We seemed to somehow find each other while hopping from bar to bar on Court Street in the evenings, and I'd buy her a beer. We started sitting next to each other in our Thursday afternoon advertising class where she'd always ask about my plans for the upcoming weekend. It was becoming apparent; this amazing young woman actually kind of liked me. You could've pushed me over with a feather.

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Our relationship didn't become serious until after I graduated from OU in early June of '89. Although she was 12 credit hours short of officially graduating, Debbie was granted permission to go through the commencement ceremony with our class, but, because of the time she took off while receiving her earlier chemotherapy treatments, she would have to stay at OU and attend a few more classes that summer quarter.

After the three hour ceremony in the Convocation Center that sunny June day, Debbie and her family made the one hour drive back to their house in Marietta for her graduation party that afternoon. My roommates Mark, Bill, and Jim, and our parents, all convened back at our small college house at 5 Atlantic Avenue for a little party of our own. Still in our black graduation robes, the four of us stood on our back wooden deck in the bright sunshine, held up our beers towards the sky, and proudly toasted our accomplishment. It was actually a bittersweet party we had that day. We knew it would be the last party of our college lives, so we intended to make it a good one.

Late that afternoon, after we hugged our parents goodbye, and after we waved and watched them pull out of our gravel driveway to head back home, we decided to really get the party started. I carried my stereo outside onto the deck, plugged it in and turned it up. Mark made another beer run, and more and more of our friends started showing up. Soon, we had an Ohio University graduation party to be proud of. For me though, something was missing; I wished Debbie was there.

Apparently, an hour away, Debbie was feeling the same way. Later that evening, after her party in Marietta was over, she actually made her dad, Bill, drive her all the way back to Athens just so she could join me at *my* party that night. I had to do a double take when I saw her standing on the deck, outside our sliding glass door, with a big smile on her face. I couldn't believe she actually came back! I jumped up off the couch, slid the door

open, and, while still unable to believe my own eyes, gave her a huge hug and thanked her for coming.

A bit later that evening, after Debbie had a chance to make it around and say hello to everyone at the party, I grabbed a small blanket from my bedroom, two cold beers out of the refrigerator, and I took her hand. We quietly snuck out the front door, made our way around the side of the house, and, with the darkness as our shield, we crept past the handful of people partying outside on the back deck. She laughed and asked where we were going as I quietly lead her away from the party and up the large hill in our backyard. About half way up that hill, when our eyes finally adjusted to the darkness, we were able to make out the tree line about thirty yards above us, and we kept walking towards it. Just before we reached the woods, I found a plush, grassy area, and I spread my blanket out on the ground.

I handed Debbie her beer, and we sat down next to each other on the blanket, both of us resting back on our elbows with our legs outstretched and bent at the knees. We pulled the tabs from the tops of our cans, took a drink, and looked back down the hill at our friends, more of whom had spilled out onto the deck sixty yards below us. Little did they know, we were watching their every move.

With the faint sounds of music and laughter creeping up the hill, Debbie sipped her beer and told me all about her graduation party earlier that day. She said she loved celebrating with her family, but at the same time, she couldn't wait for the party to end so she could come back to Athens to be with me. I smiled as we watched the

Doubly Blessed

fireflies entertain us with a dazzling light show down the hillside, just above the damp grass, and then we both lay back on the blanket and looked up at the night sky. There was no moon that night, but the stars were shining brightly, and it seemed as though there were millions of them out there, some in white clusters and some twinkling all alone. As we lay there on our backs, I told Debbie that having her come back that night was the best graduation gift I could have asked for. Then, with a heavy evening warmth in the air, and with the crickets cheerfully serenading from the woods behind us, I did it. I leaned over top of her and gave her a kiss, and then I gave her another. She looked up at me with those big blue eyes and smiled. It was our first kiss, and it was amazing.

I could have lay on that blanket, on that hill in the darkness, with Debbie snuggled up next to me, all night long. It was so nice to be there, just the two of us, away from it all, but we both knew we should probably get back to the celebration with our friends. So, fifteen minutes later, with the blanket draped over my shoulder, two crushed beer cans in my left hand, and Debbie's hand in my right, we slowly made our way back down to the party at the bottom of the hill.

Debbie and I had a blast with our friends that night, laughing and singing along with the songs that blared over the stereo speakers. Later, around midnight, we all decided to head uptown to the bars for one last hoorah on Court Street. It was a fantastic night. It was a happy, carefree night. It was a carefree night that, for me, was made complete with Debbie by my side.

That warm, early June evening in 1989 marked the end of my college life in Athens. It was the end of that four year journey that led me to the girl who traveled all the way back from Marietta just to join me at my party that night...but it was the beginning of something wonderful.

18

Empty Home

We were both dreading this moment. Bill slowly pulled to a stop in front of our apartment and put his truck in park. He got out, came around to the passenger side where I was standing, and, with tears in his eyes, he gave me a hug. He didn't want to come inside. He probably didn't even want to consider it.

I thanked him for the ride home as we hugged, and he thanked me for giving his daughter "a husband's love." I wanted so badly to tell him the pleasure was all mine, but I was too choked up to talk. I'm not sure if he watched me walk up the sidewalk to the front door or if he just drove away. I was too concerned with how I was about to feel when I stepped inside.

I put my key into the keyhole and turned it. Slowly, I pushed the door open and stepped inside. It was dark, and cold, and quiet...very quiet. I closed the door behind me and put my keys on the table. I dropped my duffel bag beside the chair, and I stood there in the dining room and looked around. I still remember the silence, the deafening silence. Someone must have cleaned the place before we left to go to Marietta for the funeral. I didn't remember doing it, but I was thankful it was clean.

I made my way into the living room and sat down on the couch. After turning on a light, I picked up the phone to call my Mom to let her know I was finally home, but, to my surprise, my Dad answered. I could tell he was happy to hear from me when I told him Bill had just dropped me off. He said, "Good," and he told me my

Mom wasn't there, that she was out running errands and wouldn't be back for a while. He then asked how I was holding up, but the lump in my throat kept me from being able to answer. Knowing I was trying to hold back tears, his voice cracked on the other end of the line as he gave me a piece of advice I'll never forget. He told me to hang up the phone, place an elbow on each knee, put my face in the palms of my hands, and cry as hard as I could, for as long as I could. I hung up the phone and did just that. I sat there alone on the edge of our couch and cried harder than I'd ever cried in my life. It helped. It helped a lot.

After I pulled myself together, I slouched back on the couch, took a deep breath, and looked around the room. My eyes eventually ended up on the presents that were stacked neatly under the Christmas tree in the corner. They were all still wrapped, waiting to be opened by Debbie and me.

I just sat there and stared at them, knowing that, at some point, I would have to open them. I slowly got up off the couch, plugged in the Christmas tree lights, and put Debbie's Christmas CD on the stereo. I then knelt down by the tree and started to separate the gifts into piles. In one pile, I put the gifts that we had gotten for our parents and siblings. In another pile were the gifts I got for Debbie, and in the third pile were the gifts Debbie had gotten for me.

While sitting on the floor with my back against the couch, I reached over and picked up one of the boxes that Debbie had so carefully wrapped for me, held it on my lap, and looked at it. She had made sure to put pretty

ribbons and bows on all the presents, and she was so proud of herself for making my gifts look so nice. I very slowly ran the tips of my fingers along the silver ribbon that was crisscrossed tightly around the dark green wrapping paper, knowing that Debbie's own fingers had touched that very same ribbon just eight weeks earlier. I knew I had to, but I didn't want to break that ribbon or remove that big silver bow. I hated to undo what she had done.

Finally, I forced myself to tear the paper from the box, and I opened the lid. Inside, I found a black sweater, and laying on top of the sweater, I was surprised to find a small piece of white paper. On the paper, in Debbie's handwriting, was the phrase, "Always remember – I Love You."

Stunned, I picked up the piece of paper, held it between my thumb and forefinger, and I stared at it. I could not believe what I was seeing! After I laid the box on the carpet beside me, I sat up straight and looked around the room, almost as if to see if someone was watching me.

With tears in my eyes, I picked up another gift, tore the paper from it, and opened the lid. Inside that box, laying on top of a gray Ohio State sweatshirt, was another note that read, "Always remember – I Love You." With each remaining gift that I opened, I found a note inside. It was almost as if Debbie *was* there with me in our living room, talking to me, watching me open my gifts.

Debbie had written, "Always remember – I Love You," on small pieces of paper and put them inside each

gift as she wrapped it. I'm sure she had fully intended to be sitting there with me as I opened the presents to find the notes. I'm sure she was anxious to see the look on my face as I found each one. I'm sure she would have been pleased with herself for thinking up such a clever plan. I'm sure she was looking forward to telling me she loved me.

I couldn't bear to unwrap the cherubs that I had gotten for her; they could wait. I left them wrapped in the ribbons and bows that I had so carefully placed on each box, and I slid them all back under the tree.

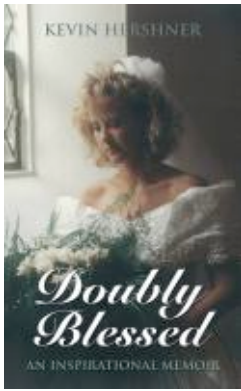
Exhausted, I went into the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water, and I stood there at the sink and drank it. I then walked back into our living room, unplugged the Christmas tree lights, turned off the stereo, and slowly walked up the stairs to our bedroom. It's amazing how tired you get just from crying. I didn't even bother to get undressed. I just fell backwards onto our bed.

As I lay there in the dark, I found myself staring at the silver chain hanging from the ceiling fan above me. The fan blades were still, and the eight inch chain with the small silver ball on the end of it was hanging straight down. The moonlight shining through the bedroom window was hitting it just right, making it shimmer. With my eyes fixed on it, I began talking to Debbie, asking her for a sign to let me know she was OK. I asked her to make that chain move. "Make it sway back and forth, just once, just a little."

I didn't take my eyes off of it; I just *knew* it was going to move. I begged Debbie, "Come on – *please*

make it move!” I stared at that chain for what seemed like hours, talking to her, begging her.

The chain never moved. It finally hit me - I was alone.



***Doubly Blessed** is an inspirational, true story about the author's life as a younger man and how he dealt with his first wife's death from cancer at the young age of 26. It conveys the message that no matter how bleak the situation, if you look hard enough and long enough, you can usually find a light at the end of the tunnel. It's a story of hope.*

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